

ART. VIII.—*Castle How, Peel Wyke.* By R. G. COLLINGWOOD, M.A., F.S.A.

Read at the Site, July 5th, 1923.

PEEL Wyke* is a bay at the foot of Bassenthwaite Lake, and Castle How is a rocky hillock rising steeply from the water's edge on its south side. It is an isolated hog-backed ridge, measuring at its base about 300 by 150 yards and lying nearly east and west. Its eastern end consists of a bluff overhanging the lake and now cut through by the track of the Cockermouth, Keswick and Penrith Railway; to the west it diverges from the shore, from which its western end is over 200 yards distant. The Skiddaw slate of which it is composed does not naturally weather into precipitous forms, but the north and south sides of the ridge are too steep to be ascended even by an unloaded and unopposed man without some difficulty, and do not require any artificial obstacles to make them easily defensible. On the east, and still more on the west, the spine of the ridge rises at an easy slope, and here a series of ditches have been cut.

On the west the ridge rises at a uniform angle of about one in four. Half-way up, we reach the first obstacle, a quite small bluff, made by cutting the soft rock into a scarp of eight feet in vertical height, standing at an angle of 40 degrees. The scarp is only some 10 yards from end to end, just enough to check a rush up the spine of the rock. Ten or twelve yards further on we reach the first ditch. This also is very short, about 15 yards long; the rock-cut counterscarp is two ft. high in the centre and the scarp about nine ft.; these heights diminish to nothing at each end. After climbing the scarp, the second ditch is

* Previous description and plan, these *Trans.* N.S. xi, 118-121.

reached. This, by an error of planning, is cut obliquely, tapering to nothing on the north (see plan) and deepening on the south. It is not a very serious obstacle, the counterscarp being nowhere as much as two feet high and the scarp about eight feet. The third ditch is the most important. It is about 45 yards long and curved round the slope, not ending till it reaches the steep sides of the hill. Its counterscarp is four feet high in the centre; three feet of this are living rock, the rest consisting of rock-chips thrown up out of the ditch. The scarp is 10 feet high in the centre. The fourth ditch is smaller again; its counterscarp is two ft. high and its scarp eight feet. At the top of this scarp we reach the summit.

The defences of the eastern end are similar. Here a steep climb from the modern boat-landing leads to the ridge, which then rises in ledges towards the top. These ledges are natural, but though they show no signs of building they may well have been the site of more or less temporary habitations, and little laps here and there in the ground seem partly artificial. Some 20 yards before the summit, the first ditch is reached. It is very slight, its counterscarp being only one foot high on the south and three ft. on the north. Its scarp is six ft. high on the south, and is formed by a rocky hummock isolated from the summit by the second ditch. On the north, its scarp is three feet high. The second ditch—there are only two on this side—is the most remarkable piece of work on the site. On the north, its counterscarp is four to six feet high, and its scarp 10 feet; on the south, scarp and counterscarp alike run up to a maximum of about 12 feet. This southern part of the ditch presents visible rock-cutting to a depth of quite six feet and is 10 feet wide at the bottom, with nearly vertical rock sides.

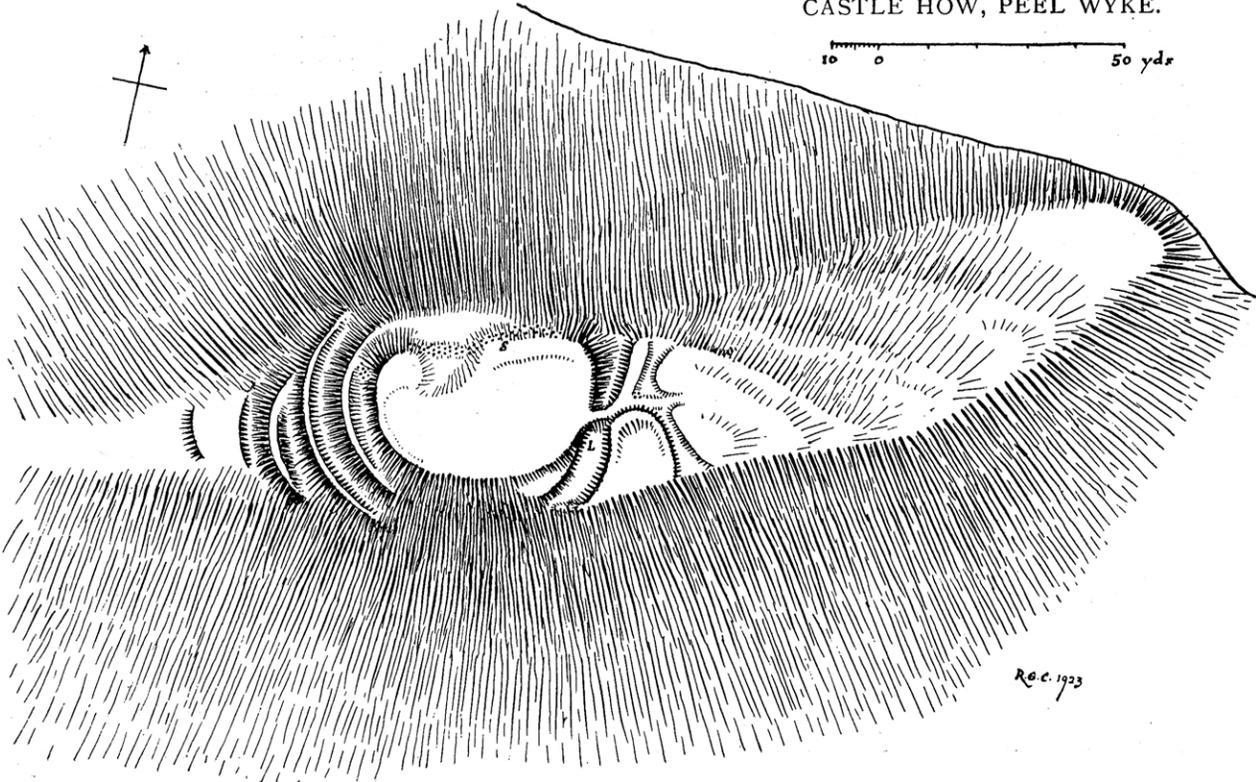
The northern and southern portions of these eastern ditches are separated by a path, led by a very well-marked causeway over the inner ditch and apparently

forming the entrance to the fort. This entrance is defended by the hummock mentioned above, which is dished out artificially so as to provide a rock breastwork, behind which defenders could crouch and throw things at anyone coming up the path, taking them in flank as they crossed the ditches. It is to be observed that before the inner ditch was cut, this hummock was evidently continuous with the summit of the hill.

The summit is an artificially flattened plateau measuring 42 by 20 yards. On the north-east its edge is raised, as if to form the foundation of an earth or stone rampart, and a cut rock-face a foot high marks off this raised strip from the main area; a much less conspicuous raised edge can be seen at the west end; but if ramparts ever existed they must have been purposely cleared away, and no trace of them is visible. On the north side a slope leads down to a ledge about 10 feet below the summit; this ledge slopes too much to be comfortably habitable, but a smaller ledge on the south-east, overlooking the ditch and measuring seven yards by three, may have been inhabited. I found fragments of pot-boilers on it.

All the foregoing features, so far as they are artificial, have been produced by rock-cutting. Careful search was made for buildings, and the following remains were found. In the innermost western and outer eastern ditches, cobble-stones had been here and there laid into the face of the ditch to consolidate it; and pitching of the same sort had been carried out very extensively along the northern edge of the fort. This was not building proper, but rather a reinforcement of slopes with a stonework facing where they were steep and friable. The stones used were mostly cobbles averaging five to six inches long, from the shore of the lake; but at one point a piece of red sandstone seven by five by three inches, with the parallel chisel-tooling of the Roman masons, had been used. We shall refer to this again. Of other relics, a number of pot-boilers

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(cobbles from the lake broken by fire and by being dropped hot into water) were found, two other pieces of red sandstone, and a piece of carboniferous limestone. These were the fruits of a surface-inspection extending over five or six hours; with the spade, or even in a longer examination without it, I have no doubt that a good deal more cobble-pitching could be found, and a great deal more imported stone.

The state of the summit is unsatisfactory. I suspect that it has been artificially levelled in modern times by someone who wished to enjoy the view from it,* and the remains of ancient ramparts or internal hut-circles or both obliterated. This could easily be tested by the spade. If the suspicion is justified, the path also may be modern; but I think not, because (a) there is a modern path on the south-west, and (b) the eastern path is on the natural line of access, typologically convincing, convenient as uniting the fort with the habitable spots on the eastern slope of the hill, and with a good natural boat-landing, and, further, it explains the hummock and the arrangement of the eastern ditches, which without it would be inexplicable. Nor is there any sign of an original entrance elsewhere.

In order to interpret these remains they must be brought into relation with others like them. Hilltop forts defended by multiple ditches are not rare in our district. The most remarkable is that in the gill above Shoulthwaite, where a rocky promontory has been defended by a series of crescentic ditches much like those on the west side of our site. Shoulthwaite has never been dug, but I have seen a slab of red sandstone there, which is an additional link with Peel Wyke. Another, in form closely resembling Peel Wyke, is Castlesteads on the Helm above Kendal. Here again a hog-backed ridge has been

* Something of the kind happened at the fort of Dun Breac in Glenskibble, Argyllshire, where we found the post holes of an eighteenth-century summer-house (*P.S.A.Scot.* xlix, 50).

defended with crescentic ramparts in series at either end; the size is much the same; and on the summit are indications of possible hut-circles (these *Trans.* N.S. viii, 108-112). Dunmallet, whose situation close to the foot of Ullswater resembles that of Peel Wyke at the foot of Bassenthwaite Lake, is another fort of the same series, though the hill is much larger and its form necessitates an almost continuous enceinte of ramparts and ditch round the central plateau (these *Trans.* N.S., xii, 407; O.S. i, 157-159; iii, 248.) On the north the rampart and ditch are double.

At Reecastle near Lowdore in Borrowdale a crag projecting from the hillside has been provided with ramparts on its one accessible side, making a kind of promontory fort not unlike Shoulthwaite (these *Trans.* N.S., xxiii, 252). Castle Crag in Borrowdale was another hill-fort, the area enclosed by ramparts being 70 yards by 40 (Housman's *Tour*, ed. 2, 1802, p. 97). "Much free-stone, both red and white, has been quarried out of the ruins. Not long since, a lead pan with an iron bow was taken out of them, and two masses of smelted iron" (West's *Guide*, ed. II, 1821, p. 95; the date of writing is 1779). Plain Samian ware and other Roman pottery has been found here and is now in the Keswick museum (these *Trans.* N.S., xxiii, 252). The large hill fort on Carrock Fell may possibly belong to the same series, though this is defended not by earthworks or rock-cut ditches, but by stone walls, a difference which, in view of facts considered below, is not vital (these *Trans.* O.S., iii, 246). An example recently explored is Mardale Castle Crag, a precipitous crag projecting from a hillside like Reecastle, and defended on the accessible side with two rock-cut ditches and a rampart of built stone, which seems to have been continued all round the summit. Digging only revealed clay floors and charcoal (these *Trans.* N.S., xxiii, 285-286, with plan).*

* I am not at all certain that Allen Knott ought not to be added to the list, though there are features about it which make me hesitate to abandon the description of it (these *Trans.* N.S. xiii, 145) as a medieval pelegrath.

These hill and promontory forts defended by regular ramparts must not be confused with a totally different series from which topographically they are indistinguishable, namely the strongholds of which Tillesburc is an example, others being the Duddon Castle How, the Castle Rock of St. John's Vale, and Peel Island. Here we seem to have the defensible houses of pre-Norman people, rendered safe rather by their position than by any inherent strength of their own or any deliberate attempt to fortify the site. They are the precursors of the earliest motte castles, in the sense that they share with them the principle of perching a private house on a place difficult of access (for Tillesburc see these *Trans*, N.S., xxiii, 138-141; Peel Island is perhaps later in date). They are private castles, though rudimentary castles; our forts of the Peel Wyke type are something more than this, to judge by the immense labour of constructing them. They must be communal strongholds.

The Roman date of the Borrowdale Castle Crag fort, and the discovery of red sandstone there, suggest that the red sandstone at Peel Wyke and Shoulthwaite is a Romano-British feature. This suggestion is converted into a certainty by the fact that one piece of sandstone at Peel Wyke was tooled in the characteristic Roman manner, being in fact a broken piece of a slab three inches thick,* tooled flat on both sides. It has been incorporated in the pitching above described, after being broken. Another Peel Wyke find was part of a thin red sandstone slab such as were used for roofing Roman buildings; and my recollection of the Shoulthwaite fragment was that it too was part of a thin slab.

Apart from parallels elsewhere, therefore, the series of forts under discussion can be dated to the Romano-British period. But parallels throw a good deal of further

* The fragment has been lodged in Keswick Museum.

light on their significance. When Julius Caesar conquered Gaul,* he found the Gauls inhabiting fortified hill-top towns. The fashion of building such towns seems to have reached Britain before the Roman conquest, but not long before, and to have spread northwards by degrees. It may have reached Wales in the first or second century, and in Wales exists a remarkable series of enormous hill-top forts, defended partly (like Carrock Fell) by stone walls, partly with ramparts and ditches resembling earthworks, but in some cases rock-cut and in some cases, notably at Dinorben, near Abergele, faced with a pitching of stone. Now these hill-forts, in which a great deal of digging has been recently done, especially by Mr. Willoughby Gardner, F.S.A., to whom most of our knowledge of them is due, were in many cases built in the second century and inhabited continuously till at least the end of the fourth. At the time they were built Wales was already conquered by the Romans, who held at this period a few of their most important forts in Wales and had abandoned the rest. The inference is inevitable. The Welsh hill-forts were not designed to resist the Romans. They were built with Roman leave and Roman encouragement, and were designed to do the same kind of work that a network of Roman forts would have done: the work, not of keeping the Welsh quiet, but of protecting a loyal and peaceful Wales against foreign assaults, which can only mean the assaults of sea-raiders from Ireland.

The absence of these great hilltop towns is as obvious in the north of England† as is their presence in Wales. It is remarkable that they begin again in Scotland; to mention the best known only, there is a town, as large as any in Wales and of the same type, on the summit of

* For what follows, see Dr. Mortimer Wheeler's brilliant paper *Roman and Native in Wales* (*Trans. Cymmrodorion Soc.*, 1921) to which I am much indebted.

† A possible partial exception is the fort on Warden Hill, near Hexham (*P.S.A. Newcastle* ser. iii, x, 144) in which there are a score or more hut-circles.

Eildon Hill, and there is the now famous settlement on Traprain Law. There are others in the lowlands, of which that on Rubers Law is remarkable for its large yield of Roman objects.* Now the north of England differed from Wales and the Lowlands in that it had a large and permanent Roman garrison. The population therefore did not need to protect itself in fortified hilltop towns from the second to the fourth century. It lived partly in the *vici* of the Roman forts, partly in peaceful settlements of the Ewe Close type, beneath the shelter of the *pax Romana*.

I attempt elsewhere in this volume to arrive at some account of what happened to this Romanised or semi-Romanised population after the departure of the Roman troops (Art. xx). I venture to suggest, as one new piece of evidence, that this population at this time built the series of forts now under consideration. It is not likely† that these forts were built earlier, while the Roman garrisons were patrolling the country and keeping out—apart from occasional and unexpected disasters—external enemies. But after the “departure of the Romans,” that is, in my opinion, after 383, the Britons of our district must have taken steps to secure their own safety; and this might be done either by a synoecism of the scattered population into new fortified hill-top towns or, with less trouble, by building little forts, resembling such towns in pattern but not in scale, to be used as occasion required, for temporary refuge. As the Romans had carted freestone to such sites as Hardknot and Ambleside, so these builders, who looked upon themselves too as Romans, carted freestone to their new hill forts, and do not seem to have known what to do with it when they got it there.

* Eildon Hill, *P.S.A. Scot.*, lv, 238, (400 hut-circles): Traprain Law, *ibid.* xlviii and following volumes.

† A merely *a priori* argument in the absence of data; I am quite prepared to find, in such sites, earlier pottery and coins.

They used Roman pottery and defended themselves behind ramparts and ditches as the Romans did; and in this way forts like Peel Wyke may have been in use from the beginning of the fifth century, or even earlier, to a date not now ascertainable which may have been as late as the coming of the Angles.
